

Money and Marriage:

Isabel's destiny in The Portrait of a Lady

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In spite of the fact that Isabel has been affronting her destiny bravely all through her life, she has been destined by socio-economic issues in Europe and her moral values that she has retained from Albany. In those days money and marriage were the two factors that determined the destiny of a woman's life because she was placed in a certain position in the society based on its socio-economic values. The twin effects of money and marriage would suppress a woman's choice and opportunities that might come her way.

Primarily, money means power to buy; to get some goods by exchanging currency, to demonstrate socio-economic position, and to extend one's freedom and to attain the rare privilege of living as one wishes. To purchase something is an universal way of spending money. By purchasing luxuries, like palatial mansions, great works of arts, antiques and expensive books, one can show his economic power to others. Since monetary system has been developed and widespread in the society, people do emphasize money and an ordinary man would be judged by his fortune. Thus, it is evident that economic conditions can be one of the important factors for marriage.

Money doesn't only give a man prestige and luxuries but also it can allow a man more choices in his life's pursuits

without being bothered by the matter of money. It means the more money he has, the more chances he will have. Ralph believes that people can choose more opportunities "to meet the requirements of their imagination" (1) if they are rich, so he says to his father on the matter of his inheritance, "I should like to put it into her power to do some of the things she [Isabel] wants. She wants to see the world for instance. I should like to put money in her purse" (2). In his mind, he doesn't want Isabel to get married only for economic conditions before experiencing the world in the way that she desires. He thinks that money is not a goal of life but a means to avoid a fruitless marriage and to accomplish each individual's purpose in life. The receiver of a large fortune, Isabel, is not a vulgar money-worshiper at all, and she talks about her fortune with Ralph as follows:

A large fortune means freedom, and I'm afraid of that. It's such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one should't, one would be ashamed. And one must keep thinking; it's a constant effort. I'm not sure it's not a greater happiness to be powerless (3).

Isabel is well aware that along with an inherited fortune comes a nuisance — the burdensome responsibility that "such a fine thing", in her term, is to be used in an appropriate way. Fur-

thermore, Isabel begins to intensify the illusion about the power of money and resolves to put it to the best use while respecting her spirit of independence at the same time. Thus, in spite of what happens, Isabel keeps this resolution because she believes her fortune will help her in discovering the world and becoming a knowledgeable woman.

Inheritance often changes a person's life and the behavior of these around him, especially when it is a large amount. The attitude it engenders reflects its recipient's ideas of money and of life. I observe three types of attitude in the story. Firstly, there is the attitude of persons, like Mr. Osmond and Madame Merle, who have been probably overly conscious of money for a long time. They are so obsessed with money that they attempt to get whatever they can get, taking every possible means. However, they have come to know the fact that money has power but it also has limitations. Mr. Osmond notices that it is impossible for him to purchase nobility with money, even if he has such a large amount as Lord Warburton does, though he can't help pursuing his desire, which is, with Madame Merle's eager insistence, to match his daughter with Lord Warburton. He goes further by pushing Isabel into the "picture". Secondly, there is the attitude of persons, like Isabel and Ralph, who have nev-

er really had a great desire for money, but have the fortune to inherit a vast sum. They overextend the limitations of its power, thinking of it more than it ought to be. This misjudgment leads them into sorrows later on. Unbeknownst to Isabel, such a large fortune creates different attitudes in the people around her as with Madame Merle's plan of marrying her to Mr. Osmond. Isabel, though being perplexed with the fortune at first, believes that she can get even the ultimate liberation. Ralph tries to persuade his father to divert a large share of his inheritance to Isabel, as much as 70,000 pounds because he believes this inheritance can prevent Isabel from a meaningless marriage. At first, Mr. Touchett's attitude was ambivalent toward Ralph's suggestions because he considered Ralph's plan risky and disastrous for Isabel. However, as a father, he is touched by Ralph's concern, which he interprets as an expression of Ralph's love for Isabel, a love that will never be requited because of his life-threatening illness. For Ralph, whether he is clearly conscious of it or not, money becomes a means to demonstrate his love for Isabel at this point. In addition, Ralph expects to see how his power of money be exercised in the form of Isabel's freedom. Isabel inherits both a large part of his fortune and the concept of mighty money. Thirdly, there is

the attitude of Lord Warburton, who accepts the fact that he is a man of wealth and thinks it wise to make the best use of it in order to lead a satisfying life. Thus, for him, money is not an end of life at all. Through marriage, he intends to give Isabel the opportunity of bettering her condition. After Isabel refuses his proposal, he can't admit that she doesn't wish to better her life through this means, and of course, neither does everybody else.

Isabel chooses to spend her money on Mr. Osmond. She considers that getting married to a man with sophisticated taste but with no wealth is the best way, both to make the most of her fortune and to establish her own life style. In effect, she attempts to acquire Mr. Osmond's life as well as her personal freedom. In addition, for her, the act of choosing her husband itself exhibits her credo of liberation. Thus, she confesses to Ralph:

I've only one ambition — to be free to follow out a good feeling.... Do you complain of Mr. Osmond because he's not rich? That's just what I like him for. I've fortunately money enough; I've never felt so thankful for it as today(4).

As a natural consequence, Isabel and Mr. Osmond form a peculiar relationship, regarding the matter of money. For Mr. Osmond

money is the cost of maintaining his artistic taste. He needs the money, for he wishes people to perceive him as artistic and so he wants to satisfy such a reputation. He demands that Isabel sacrifice herself to his desires to mold her because he believes what belongs to him is an expression of himself. However, it is evident that her wealth is a requirement for him to maintain his life style and appearances to the public. Therefore, in this way, Isabel, who has decided to live freely, with great independence and without being bothered by the matter of money or any other socio-economic position, is destined to limit her freedom of will, ironically by the power of money.

The relationship between them is, without any doubt, that of a married couple. After Isabel rejected two proposals by Casper Goodwood and Lord Warburton, she decides to marry Mr. Osmond in order to seek the world. However, marital unhappiness follows. And though Isabel tries to hide such misery, those who love her can't help but sense her unhappiness. It breaks Ralph's heart to see her in such a miserable state, for it is just the opposite to what Isabel has expected of being married to Mr. Osmond.

One will think that the meanings of a marriage which functions appropriately could be divided into three categories;

the prosperity of the descendants, sharing of happiness and unhappiness in life, and sharing of fortune. Referring to them, the marriage between Mr. Osmond and Isabel is mercenary and bleak. Firstly, the sterility after marriage shows their hopelessness. Bearing a child can be a symbol of matrimonial affection. However, the only baby born to Isabel had died. The only child between them, Pansy, was born as a result of the immoral conduct of Mr. Osmond. Secondly, Mr. Osmond has no intention of sharing happiness and unhappiness with his wife. What he wants is to mold her in order to keep her under his thumb. He shows disgust toward Isabel's free conduct out of his control. When Ralph is about to die, for example, Mr. Osmond who is always conscious of his reputation, criticises Isabel harshly for her wish to go to cheer him up because he thinks this kind of behavior is not appropriate for his wife, thus diminishing his image in public. Keeping company with her old friends is a joyous time for her, but he tries to find fault with them. In addition to them, Isabel has eagerly expected to learn art and culture in Europe from her husband, but she finds that his way of life is nothing but deceptive. Thirdly, even though Mr. Osmond would not want to share what couples are inclined to do such as the joys and sorrows of a married life,



Mr. Osmond, on the contrary, is willing to share only in Isabel's inherited wealth. In order to save an unknown art collector, Isabel, too, wishes to offer her fortune, that in her belief, will bring about her expectations in life, in this case purchasing the idealized artistic life. Without knowing what it should be, Isabel indulges in the illusion of the power of money, in other words, what one can do by consumption, and consequently she loses her proper judgment on it. On the other hand, Mr. Osmond doesn't fulfill Isabel's dream of a perfect married life. Instead, he is crafty enough to take advantage of any chance of using her fortune to satisfy himself, knowing Isabel's innocence of the reality of money. Therefore, being far from sharing the ups and downs of life, their married life have been unceasingly tumultous.

The realization of the marriage between Mr. Osmond and Isabel has been primarily the result of Ralph's generosity in having a large part of his inheritance from his father be given to Isabel. However, such a realization has been furthered by Madame Merle's conspiracy that Mr. Osmond's poverty be married to Isabel's wealth. In short, Madame Merle attempts to trap Isabel for money. However, Isabel admires Madame Merle as "she appeared to have in her experience a touchstone for

everything" (5) and can't see through her character, especially her desire for money. Madame Merle can't be faulted for this since such blindness exists within Isabel herself. She is obsessed with the idea that a woman should choose her spouse at her will, for expanding her freedom and establishing her identity. Besides, she has wanted to involve herself in an artistic and sophisticated life style and here she finds Mr. Osmond. However, nobody but Madame Merle has agreed to their marriage, thinking about Isabel. Ralph's comments on Mr. Osmond — "I think he's narrow, selfish. He takes himself so seriously" (6) and "He's the incarnation of taste" (7) — can afford examples of his slurred reputation. It is commonly considered that Lord Warburton is one of the most ideal persons to get married to and Ralph says as follows:

Warburton's such a thorough good sort; a man, I consider he has hardly a fault. And then, he's what they call here no end of a swell. He has immense possessions, and his wife would be thought a superior being(8).

Contrary to public opinion, Isabel has made up her mind to marry Mr. Osmond. She knows clearly that to become a wife of Lord Warburton means gaining far-flung fame in Lockleigh and possessing an ample fortune. At the same time, she can live as a member of the upper-class in the old world, which she has been

interested in and dreaming of for a long time. However, according to her philosophy of life, especially her view of marriage, she has never wished to entrust her life to others. She claims as follows:

I don't see what harm there is in my wishing not to tie myself. I don't want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do(9).

For Isabel, marriage is not the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow but that mundanity of married life should be a way of self-realization. On attempting an analysis of the reasons for her marriage with Mr. Osmond, it is obvious that the influences from her cultural background appear. By the influence of Puritanism, "morality" and "soul" are the two major factors for her in deciding, which means that she should always be self-examining her attitude and to never forget doing good deeds. For example, one can perceive the influence of it in this passage in the novel:

...she often checked herself with the thought of the thousands of people who were less happy than herself — a thought which for the moment made her fine, full consciousness appear a kind of immodesty(10).

She can't forgive herself if there is any sign of misconduct or

glossing over. Moreover, the fame and wealth, that she would gain by a marriage with Lord Warburton, are desirable and valuable to a puritan only when they are results of doing good and being diligent.

Isabel has been attracted by an unknown art collector, Mr. Osmond, because she has thought he has had high sensibility to see the world, probably too much, enough to plan his life as "To resign myself. To be content with little" (11). Her first impression of him is as follows:

His sensibility had governed him -- possibly governed him too much; it had made him impatient of vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history...such shyness as his -- the shyness of the ticklish nerves and fine perceptions -- was perfectly consistent with the best breeding (12).

The fact that to Isabel, Mr. Osmond doesn't seem to be at all interested in money, but has interest only in the beauty of art impresses Isabel as great. To Isabel, such simple desires in life are almost like Utopia. Besides, Isabel is fascinated with Mr. Osmond's view of not wanting to belong to any system -- the system that Isabel too wishes to escape, as she has come to Europe in hope of escaping from the restrained life in New England.

At the same time, Isabel wishes to distance herself from Casper Goodwood, too. Later, he follows after Isabel all the way to England only because he likes her very much. However, she feels unpleasant being with him because his presence reminds her of her restrained days in Albany. He is thought of as the right man to get married to, for he carries on business successfully in Massachusetts with the firm background in terms of money and other conditions for marriage that nine of ten women possibly expect as follows:

He was the son of a proprietor of well-know cotton-mills...Casper at present managed the works, and with a judgement and a temper...had received the better part of his education at Harvard College...discovered himself a sharp eye for the mystery of mechanics, and had invented an improvement in the cotton-spinning process which was now largely used and was known by his name(13).

However, Isabel has no intention of accepting his proposal because she is afraid that he will suppress her, although she feels certain that he loves and will love her very much. In a marriage with Casper Goodwood or Lord Warburton, she doesn't expect freedom of her will, which she has been and will be emphasizing in her life. Although it seems to be contradictory to the atmosphere of the place where she has been raised, she wishes to enjoy liberty to the full as a true American. This

trait of hers is evidenced in her letter of denial to the proposal of Lord Warburton:

We see our lives from our own point of view; that is the privilege of the weakest and humblest of us; and I shall never be able to see mine in the manner you proposed(14).

However, it is almost a truism to say that Isabel's expectations don't come to the surface well after the marriage and the power of money doesn't work successfully to secure true happiness between her and Mr. Osmond if one reads this novel till the end. Her impression of their house, "...the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls...they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (15) is suggestive of the bleakness of their married life. After all, she comes to notice where she has been forced to belong to in fact, she has been forced to be put in the cage of Mr. Osmond's beloved conventionality. In criticizing Isabel about her "too many ideas and that she must get rid of them" (16), he intends to mold Isabel. Mr. Osmond interprets Isabel's opinion as offensive to him and that he would prefer her to "have nothing of her own but her pretty

appearance" (17). Before marriage, she had misjudged her future husband and, at the same time, her future as she had thought, "It was in all this she had found her occasion, She would launch his boat for him; she would be his providence; it would be a good thing to love him" (18). On the contrary, gradually, she has to break the illusion that she has of Mr. Osmond as well as of the power of money. She is obliged to pretend to have allegiance to him as a doll in front of him, though unexpectedly being far from her liberation.

This is how the path of Isabel's life goes on. Though it looks miserable and abandoned, she doesn't blame her destiny for her failure in life, that is to say, she doesn't consider herself a victim at all. After all of the tricks have been played on her by destiny, she realizes that the very action of choosing her direction of life by herself is the ultimate liberation. Thus, she wants to have the responsibility for the results of her choices, even if it looks full of trials and tribulations. The evidence of it is her refusal of Casper Goodwood's offer of support at the very end of the story. No matter how unsatisfactory she feels about herself, if it is her choice, it is her responsibility and in her power to be either happy or unhappy. Divorce is an easy way, however, consequently, it can be a sign

of her defeat against her destiny. She admits that her infinite desire for life ahead of her has been an illusion, due to lacking of consideration, and she used to have the intention of escaping from the burden of her fortune. Thus, in other words, she awakes from a dream since she has been "punished(19)" and has been beaten by conventionality, for she has wanted to look at life for herself.

One can read an awakening pattern of Isabel because, without mending her philosophy of life all through the novel, she has grown spiritually; that is she hasn't succumbed to the power of money. Or rather, I would say, there is a structure of exchange, a structure in which a character sacrifices something in order to attain something higher, which will eventually leads to spiritual growth. As for Isabel, she sacrifices her inheritance and expectations of life, but in return she becomes very moral and has true love for Ralph after all. She can get what is really important to her and also in this sense, she is not a victim of the power of money and her marriage accompanied with it. Instead, establishing her ultimate independence is greatly owing to the power of money. Therefore, Ralph is not entirely responsible for all of the incidents fallen to Isabel and not a victim of them, either. He feels his responsibility for his di-



verting a large portion of his fortune to Isabel, as he says to her "I believe I ruined you" (20) when he is about to die. Moreover, he recognizes his true love, an eternal love at the risk of his life because Isabel, who acts as a goddess of liberty for his joys, is just what he lives for. In short, he sacrifices his life and his wealth as a demonstration of his love and dedication to Isabel, ever after his death. The great proverb, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" couldn't have been better exemplified than it is in this story. On the other hand, Mr. Osmond, who sacrifices nothing, can attain nothing, for he loses Isabel's, Pansy's, and Madame Merle's benevolence and confidence in him, and then he has no growth. In the beginning of the story, he appears as a lonely and hypocritical man, who has not been given a chance to change this posture before. Later, Isabel provides several opportunities for him to change, but tragically he refuses to do so.

It isn't known to the readers what happens to Isabel after she leaves Casper Goodwood, who offers her a means of "escape" at the very end of the story. Nevertheless, one can imagine that she will stick to her lofty aspirations, perhaps will journey with Mr. Osmond to the end — surely she will make efforts once more to carry the burden of responsibility

for her inherited fortune, accepting it as her destiny.

Isabel chooses Mr. Osmond after experiencing such tragedies and the enslavement in the marriage with him. When she was single, she had a lot of dreams ahead of her and didn't care what society thought of her actions, satisfying her freedom of choice. At the end, again, she is offered a chance to alter her "evil " choice by going with Casper Goodwood, but it is obvious that she refuses his proposal. One can ask if Mr. Osmond succeeds in molding Isabel into someone who worries about what other people think and if Isabel becomes concerned about her image, that people will think she is a failure if she divorces him. In fact, she chose Mr. Osmond at first, and she decides to follow him at the end of the story. It is apparent that she hasn't changed, she retains her freedom, making her own choices and not allowing herself be dictated. Though her two choices are the same person, there is a remarkable difference under the veneer, that is she receives the fruit of the experiences that makes her a knowledgeable woman as she has dreamed. It means that even if her initial choice has been a misjudgment due to her ignorance, as she recognizes, she chooses the same person once again, as true judgment at her own will. In this sense, contrary to how restrained she has seemed to be by her fortune,

she becomes absolutely free and is able to keep her spirit of independence all through her life, to the most degree of all of the characters in the story.

#### NOTE

- (1) Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1975) Chapter 18, p.160.
- (2) I bid., Chapter 18, p.160.
- (3) I bid., Chapter 21, p.193.
- (4) I bid., Chapter 34, p.293.
- (5) I bid., Chapter 19, p.166.
- (6) I bid., Chapter 34, p.291.
- (7) I bid., Chapter 34, p.291.
- (8) I bid., Chapter 15, p.132.
- (9) I bid., Chapter 15, p.133.
- (10) I bid., Chapter 6, p. 56.
- (11) I bid., Chapter 24, p.227.
- (12) I bid., Chapter 24, pp.224-225.
- (13) I bid., Chapter 13, pp.105-106.
- (14) I bid., Chapter 13, p.107.
- (15) I bid., Chapter 42, p.360.
- (16) I bid., Chapter 42, p.359.
- (17) I bid., Chapter 42, p.359.
- (18) I bid., Chapter 42, p.358-359.
- (19) I bid., Chapter 54, p.478.
- (20) I bid., Chapter 54, p.478.